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SUBJECT: TBILISI: PATRIARCH'S TAKE ON MOSCOW MEETINGS,  
ABKHASIA, ALEXEI II

REF: TBILISI 2438

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT. REASONS: 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) Summary: During a December 22 meeting with the Ambassador, Georgian Patriarch Ilia II discussed his recent meeting in Moscow with Russian President Medvedev the current situation in Abkhazia, and the likely successor of Patriarch Alexei II. Ilia II expressed his desire to serve a positive role in normalizing and stabilizing relations with Russia though he firmly states that Georgia's territorial integrity will never be compromised. He noted that Medvedev seemed open to the possibility of resuming normal bilateral relations with Georgia, but doubted that Medvedev is truly free to make these kinds of decisions. Ilia II's comments regarding the Norashen Church dispute in Tbilisi reported reftel. End Summary.

#### Meeting the Medvedevs

¶2. (C) Ilia II said his meeting with Medvedev was a very positive one. The Patriarch sees his role as trying to bring relations between Russia and Georgia back to normal. He praised Medvedev as intelligent and thoughtful. Ilia II discussed the possibility of ethnic Georgian IDPs returning to the so-called "buffer zones" within undisputed Georgia and to the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Ilia II said Medvedev supported their return and was open to compromise and working together to avert any humanitarian crisis. Ilia II also discussed reopening the borders, resuming direct flights, and lifting the unilateral Russian trade embargo. Medvedev appeared open to the possibility though Ilia II said he doubts Medvedev is truly free to make any such decisions. According to Ilia II, his contacts in Moscow all tell him Medvedev has little power and that Putin is the sole decision maker. Ilia II noted that he was seated next to Medvedev and his wife at a dinner in honor of Alexei II and appreciated the gesture. He also very much appreciated Mrs. Medvedev's suggestion that they pray for all the victims of the conflict. Ilia II said he told President Medvedev that Georgia's territorial integrity was non-negotiable, and Georgia could never be reconciled with the separation of Abkhazia and S. Ossetia from Georgia proper. Medvedev said he understood, but suggested Abkhaz and South Ossetian opinions on the matter need to be included in any discussions.

#### Abkhazia's Deal Looking Worse and Worse

¶3. (C) Ilia II agreed with Ambassador's comment that the Abkhaz leadership might be feeling some remorse over its decision to put itself firmly under Russian domination. The Patriarch (a former Metropolitan of Abkhazia) said he thinks the Abkhaz are finding out that "independence" is not what they had imagined it would be. Ilia II expressed his concern that Russia will try to resettle Abkhazia with ethnic Russians to hasten a de-facto incorporation of the region into the Russian Federation. Ilia II agreed with Ambassador's assessment that the Abkhaz had a choice to be an autonomous part of Georgia or wholly part of Russia, but

added that if the Abkhaz leadership had/has no sense of that reality, little can be done.

Next Russian Patriarch Will Be ....

¶4. (C) Ilia II told the Ambassador it is very difficult to tell who will be the next Patriarch of Russia. He said he received a warm welcome in Russia despite speculation that he would not travel to Moscow due to the August war. Ilia II said Metropolitan Kirill met him at the airport, and they had a brief, cordial conversation. Ilia II described Kirill as a "stricter" personality than Alexei II. He cautioned that although Kirill is a likely successor to Alexei II, his accession to Patriarch of Russia is by no means assured. Ilia II expressed no special insights into the impending decision, but said that the Belorussian Metropolitan, Philaret, and Chancellor of the Moscow Patriarchate, Kliment, were names he had heard floated while in Moscow. In any event, Ilia II hopes to continue constructive engagement with the Moscow Patriarchate, regardless of who is named to the post.

TEFFT